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**The Iowa Blind History Archive
History of Blindness in Iowa - Oral History Project
Interview with [Name]
Conducted by [Name]
[Date]
Transcribed by [Name]**

NOTE: Any text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

**Louise Duvall, Des Moines, Iowa
Karla Ice
Louise Duvall's home in Urbandale, Iowa,
September 18, 2010, 3:00 p.m.**

Karla Ice: We have known each other, intermittently off and on over the last several years, because both Louise and my husband Jonathon Ice were, or are, employees of the Iowa Department for the Blind. The purpose of this interview is

that it is part of the Iowa Department for the Blind's History of Blindness in Iowa, Oral History Project. Louise, do we have your consent to have this interview recorded?

Louise Duvall: We do.

Ice: Very good. Okay. To start, tell me a little bit about yourself; where you're from, if you are willing, how old you are, things like that.

Duvall: Sure. I was born and raised in Audubon County, which is about half way between Des Moines and Omaha. My parents were farmers. My mother was a schoolteacher. I attended the University of Iowa and got my Bachelor's of Arts degree there. I attended Drake University, where I earned the credits to be a certified teacher. I did my student teaching at Lincoln High. I returned home and lived with my parents for two years where I taught at a rural school in southwestern Iowa, a poverty school. Then I continued living there for another two years while my husband got out of the service, attended Drake and got his master's degree. He then got a job working for Dr. Jernigan at the Department. Both he and I had known blind people from our college days. I knew a couple women, who to this day are very active in the advocacy organizations. I knew them through the Methodist Church and my husband had been a reader for Sue Micich, who was later a staff person at the Department.

Ice: So then, your first job was as a schoolteacher and later you worked for The Department for the Blind.

Duvall: That's right. I taught school, as I said, for four years in Exira, Iowa. Then when my husband became employed and we moved to Des Moines, he was working for the Department as a Rehabilitation Teacher. He was traveling the southern part of the state, so he was gone overnight several nights a week. So, I became kind of a volunteer in that I drove Jim Omvig, who was at that time a Counselor, and he has since moved on. He ran the Orientation Center for a while here in Des Moines and then he went to Washington, D.C. where he was a lawyer for the Social Security Administration. Ultimately, he went on to Alaska and was the Director of the Louise Rude Center for Deaf Blind. My introduction to blindness became much more intense.

When Jim came in off the road and managed the Orientation Center, I was scooped up by Dr. Wallace Schrader, who was a blind Home Teacher, who had southwest Iowa as his territory. He hired me to be his driver and his reader. That was probably one of the most positive experiences I'd ever had. He was just wonderful. His wife was the Home Ec teacher at the Department, and they just adopted me and had me in for meals and included me when they would have students come to their house in the evening. I would often provide the transportation and then they would let me stay and eat and enjoy the fellowship. So that was kind of my early introduction.

Ice: Eventually you actually were employed, I understand.

Duvall: That's right, that's right. When my husband was fired from working at the Department. I needed to quit volunteering and to get a full time job. During the time

between when my husband left employment at the Department, what a lovely euphemism, I am on board; we both had sales jobs, but you can't live well on that. My husband, then, could not deal with all of this and so he filed for divorce. When he left me, then Mr. Jernigan asked Mr. Omvig and Dr. and Mrs. Schroeder if they thought that I would be a good employee. So, they called me up and said, "How would you like to be paid for what you've been volunteering to do for years?" I thought that was a pretty good idea. I was hired to be a Rehabilitation Teacher, but I didn't know my territory, I didn't know job responsibilities or anything like that until I had been on the job for about eight months.

Ice: So, you had intensive training. So, what was your first day...in our previous conversations, you mentioned some interesting experiences on your first day.

Duvall: Oh, my first day was like no other first day on a new job. First of all, we were expected to dress very well. My previous job I had worn polyester pantsuits. That was the "in" thing. So, I had a week's notice between when I left my old job and started working at the Department to come up with dresses, suits, skirts and blouses; what we would have called church wear, dress up clothes. I was well dressed my first day on the job. I barely got in the front door and someone met me, I don't remember who, told me to turn around and go back out and get on that white bus. I've since learned that bus has always been referred to as "Moby Dick," the elusive whale. So I went out and found an empty seat clear in the back where we had to sit kind of humped over the rear tire with your chin resting on your knees, you

know. I'm full of questions and no one is talking to me. Just "go do that, go sit there" and that was the end of it. I was trying to get the lady next to me to talk to me. She just ignored me, just pretended like she couldn't see me and I wasn't there.

We drove for miles and miles and it was hours and hours in that bus, and ended up in Fort Dodge, Iowa attending the funeral of the husband of one of the three Commissioners, the people who are appointed by the governor to manage the Department. Now we call it the Department, then it was the Commission. It was Mrs. Nel Bonnell's husband had passed away and this was his funeral service. Since she was a Commissioner, Mr. Jernigan determined that there would be a good turnout of blind people and staff at that funeral. So that is what I got to do on my first day on the job, go to a funeral. (Laughter)

Ice: All right. So how long did you work at the IDB and what were some of the various things that you did there over the years?

Duvall: I had been trained to be a classroom teacher, so the skill of teaching was something that I had accomplished. Now the skills of blindness I had to learn. I had some excellent roll models during my time as a volunteer, but I still needed to wear sleep shades and internalize that feeling of confidence in those skills. But I got a whole variety of teaching jobs that were just...we need one of a kind now. I learned to use the Opticon. I became the official teacher of the Opticon; Optical Tactile Conversion. It was a device that had little tiny vibrating pins. As you moved the camera across a print letter, the contrast of the

black ink on the white paper would make those little pins vibrate. I would sit there by the hour and work with people and say, “Now the letter “d” begins with a round shape and it ends with a tall vertical.” Some people would have excellent sense of touch. I remember Karen Keninger was one of my students, as was Sandy Ryan. Sandy is a Commissioner now and Karen is the Director. Not everyone that I worked with was fortunate, as they are to have a good sense of touch.

I also taught, I was assigned and therefore taught, GED for blind people. My assignment was to see that this particular individual was able to pass the Social Studies section or able to pass the English section or the Math section or whatever it was that needed to be passed, because you could take it in sections in those years. Of course, this was just the beginning of the era of cassettes, and so not everything was available in alternative media and often I would have to be the reader as well as the person who darkened the little circle on the test score pages.

Ultimately, ultimately, Mr. Taylor, who was in charge of Field Op, started negotiating with me about what was going to be my permanent assignment. First of all, they offered me the job of the sewing teacher in Orientation. I would have loved to do that, but they wanted me to live in the building. I owned this house, or the bank and I did, and I also had a St. Bernard dog, which was just a little too large for apartment living, I thought. So, that wasn't going to work. The next week Mr. Taylor said, “Well, how ‘bout we're going to open a new office in Sioux City, how would you like to be the Rehab Teacher up there?” I said to him, “Well, I'm going to need to sell my house and I would need to move and I don't have any family, so I would need assistance and

financial help to do that.” Well, he didn’t want to pay to move me and you know, this just wasn’t going to work out. So ultimately, I’m afraid the single people got shifted around, the ones who weren’t yet established. They ended up living in the building or going to Sioux City for the Rehab Teacher’s job.

I was assigned 24 counties in north central Iowa. I worked with two Rehabilitation Counselors then, one who had half of them on the east side and one of them had half of them on the west side.

Ice: So, I bet you had a lot of interesting experiences on the road.

Duvall: Oh, I just loved being a Rehabilitation Teacher. I still have permanent friends from people I met 35 and almost 40 years ago. When they were newly blind and I was coming to teach them how to quilt or how to bake or how to push the vacuum or give their own insulin shots, measure out their own medications, whatever it might be. I just really, really enjoyed that. I must have been fairly good at my job, because Mr. Taylor would always send new staff out with me. It would be my job to show them the ropes and kind of introduce them into the culture.

One time he assigned a young man who must have been about my age. The man was blind and he didn’t have very good dress sense. My assignment from Mr. Taylor was to make sure that I got him out of these construction worker boots and into dress shoes that would look better with his suit. We were going in the winter and there was no excuse. You might want to go in a snowsuit and overshoes, but what we ended up going in was our high heels and our dress

coats. We're going up to people's front doors and we were walking in sidewalks that hadn't been scooped and stuff. I'm mincing along in my high heels. I had already tried several times to be very discreet and polite to talk to him about what a dressed up man looks like, and what was business attire and how he really needed to think about buying some dress shoes. I said, "You may mumble and grumble about your slick soles like I am now as we're walking here on the ice..." Anyway, he quit talking to me and I turned around and look and there he was spinning on his behind like a top, going round and around like that.

15:00

Duvall: His fancy old construction boots that he thought were going to save him from the ice and the snow and whatever did not help. Anyway, that night we were in Webster City. We travel under state rates and that means you don't stay in the nicest of places. A lot of these small towns don't have chain motels. You're in some kind of mom and pop thing or a very old hotel or whatever. Well, there was a very old, but very well maintained, little motel that was owned by an older couple who had gone to school with one of the Rehab Teachers at the Department...another lady who was about to retire. She had written a book about her experiences growing up in the country and going to country school and she had mentioned this man. Ever since then he just rolled out the red carpet for anybody from the Department. So, he came out to meet me in my state car and I'm opening up the trunk and getting ready to bring the suitcases in and stuff. He grabs the suitcases in one hand and this new male staff person in the other and he says to

me, “Shall I put this man in your room?” As if he were one of the suitcases. (Laughter) I said, “No, he had to come in and register, he’d have his own room.” It’s just kind of one of the funny stories.

Ice: Yes, Yes. Over the years, were there a lot of changes in the way that you did the teaching and the tools that you used?

Duvall: Well certainly there was a lot of technology just starting to happen, in that, cassette machines were coming in and they became smaller and more efficient and it became something affordable for people who might want to record recipes or addresses, things like that. I remember that the first personally owned calculator was over \$500 and now, you know, they just throw it in free when you buy your iPhone or your whatever...any technology that’s just a free side product. I was a teacher for about four years and then I got promoted, I guess, to be a counselor and I did that for one year. You know, you don’t really develop good skills in just one year. I learned to do the paperwork and stuff, but to get that network of employers and the kinds of resources that you need to be a good Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor; that takes several years to build. I only held that job for one year. And the, we, meaning the Department, applied for a grant for Independent Living, and that would allow me to work with the elderly and the multiple disabled and so I applied. I was hired to be the Supervisor of that program. I did that from 1980 to 1990 and then from ’90 to 2002 I was...let’s see...Program Administrator was the title, but I was in charge of all the Field Services; the Rehab Teachers, the Independent Living Program, the Vocational

Rehabilitation Counselors, the Deaf-Blind Specialist, and in later years we had a Assistive Technology Grant and so we had some people with some real technology skills. So, that's how it ended.

Ice: You had a broad range of responsibilities. Over all those years, did the attitude toward blind people and the opportunities that they had in the community for employment and education...did you see changes occurring in at all?

Duvall: Boy, I just hate to say this out loud because we have worked for 40 years advocating for changes, and yes there are changes in the law and yes there is more technology and yes there's more accessibility; but as far as the attitude that the general public has and employers have, I don't think I have seen that much change. I think that we keep pushing that boulder up that same mountain, time after time after time. Even my own family and my own circle of long time friends and stuff, they still don't get it...what it is that is my passion and why I get so excited about things.

Ice: So, that would bring us to the advocacy piece. You've been involved in advocacy for the blind.

Duvall: I have as much as possible. The two organizations that I'm acquainted with that are national and that have a very strong advocacy bent really believe that their leadership should be persons who are blind. I agree with that 100%. So my participation in the organizations of the blind is pretty minimal. I go to meetings when I'm called on to be the speaker or have some issue that I want to share.

But as far as being one of the real working persons, I am not. Where I have a chance to do advocacy, I think, is in my volunteer work, now that I'm retired. The whole idea of getting the word out and saying it once, saying it twice, saying it three times, that's about the best I think that I can do now.

Ice: And you have worked with Friends of the Library?

Duvall: Yes, yes, yes. Karen Kenninger, the Director of the agency asked me if I would serve on this...we evolved into a board or a committee at the time to set up a 501C3 non-for-profit charity, whose primary responsibilities would be to promote Library Services to raise funds so that activities that the Library wanted to carry out that shouldn't be paid for or couldn't be paid for with public dollars would have a resource. And so I have...I was part of that original group, that group elected me as President and I believe I have for five years. I kind of loose track of time. I think I've been at that for about five years.

Ice: So what other experiences have you had in working with the blind? Are there other things you would like to share with us? More experiences on the road or experiences with specific clients?

Duvall: I would say that one of the things that I would like to share as part of my interview is a phrase that Dr. Schroeder...well Dr. Schroeder used it, but I was thinking of Mr. Jernigan, who is the cited source for that, and he used to talk about blind people being a cross section of the population. That there were smart blind people and there

were not so smart, and there were handsome blind people and there were not so handsome, talented and rich and poor and all the alternatives that you can think of. I try to remember that and I try to share that when I hear others try to pigeon-hole or...let's see, I'm not going to come up with the right vocabulary here...but the idea that if I've met one blind person I've met them all. The characteristics of one blind person that I did meet must be the characteristics that all other blind people must have. And of course that is just not, not true. I have several personal friends who happen to be blind that our friendship goes far beyond our history of working at the Department or working on advocacy groups or anything like that. Our friendship goes into things like playing cards and going dancing and book clubs, and things that just any friends would do.

Ice: And I think you already mentioned some of your earliest contacts or earliest blind people that you knew. Do you want to elaborate on...?

Duvall: On who I know? Dropping names or something here? (Laughter) Well you can't help but know a lot of people. Either you have met them, they have called you on the telephone, you've had some little piece in their rehabilitation. One of the jobs that I didn't really care for, that every fall before college started any college student who was not able to maintain a 2.0, which is just a "C" grade point average, had to come in and visit with me before we would consider supporting them for another year in college. I heard every excuse under the sun! (Laughter) But so often it fell down to two things. One was that they were just having a great time, that they were away from the

restrictions of classroom teachers, parents, everybody who wanted to make sure that they didn't hurt themselves, didn't get into trouble, didn't whatever. They were spreading their wings, having a good time, they weren't in class and studying. Or the other thing was, quite often they were trying to take their college work without using any adaptive skills. They didn't know how to take notes, they couldn't read their handwriting. They would use a magic marker on a spiral notebook and could barely get two words on a page. That's just not efficient. They didn't know how to hire a reader, they didn't know how to go in and talk to an instructor about making the handouts or the overheads or teaching materials available electronically. I would have to be the bad guy. You will do these things or you will not graduate. So, sometimes I was the bad guy.

Ice: But I suspect in a lot of instances they buckled down.

Duvall: Oh, occasionally yes. (Laughter)

Ice: Are there other comments or memories that you want to share from your years at the Department or your experiences?

Duvall: Well I mentioned that we were very formal and very respectful and there was a hierarchy of management that we were expected to toe the line or integrate ourselves into, and that really was...well it was unique in the business world. When you would compare our employees to say Job Service, and that's kind of what our Rehab Counselors ended doing is working like a Job Service Counselor. Those people...I shouldn't say those people...there was a great

contrast in how our people were dressed and how our people treated their clients and how far out on a limb or the willingness to work after 4:30 PM or any of that kind of personal commitment. There was just a significant difference. If this bothered you, if you didn't want to work that hard or didn't want to dress well on the job or whatever, then you really needed to be encouraged to look elsewhere because this model was successful and this model worked. It was nationally respected. All of those pieces fit together.

Ice: Do you have any additional comments?

Duvall: No, I think I have rambled on adequately.

Ice: Well, thank you very much for your time, and this concludes our interview.

Duvall: All right.

30:22

(End of Recording 1)

(Beginning of Recording 2)

Ice: Some additional stories from your time on the road for The Department for the Blind.

Duvall: Yes. I was thinking, the first car that I ever bought for myself after I was divorced was a 1978 Cougar. It really was one of those "run, run, run" kind of cars; I was so proud of it. And although we had a car pool at the Department and were encouraged to drive state vehicles, there were never

enough for all the people who traveled. I just had bought this car and now I was going out on the road and so I was going to be taking my own car. Ultimately, I was going to end up in Mason City, which was the far north piece of my territory. The Counselor who covered that part of the state was Diane Weinman, and she was a mentor to me. She was just enough older and she had about 10 more years ahead of me at the Department that she could steer me around from getting into trouble, either politically or with clients or just putting my foot wrong in general.

Well, so we just always tried to stay in the same motel. We wouldn't see each other all day long but we would get back there about supper time, go to eat together, stay in the same motel, disperse the next morning off on our own ways. So, we had been to dinner, we had stayed all night. The next morning I couldn't get my brand new car to start. This was a small motel. I believe it had 14 rooms. About three of them were clean and carpeted and all of the rest they rented out to pheasant hunters and their dogs. You could imagine they were not really nice. Anyway, the guy who owned these motels, he kind of watched over us two women. So, he came along and saw that I was having car trouble. He lifted up the lid, or the hood, and he looks down and, here I told you this was a really powerful, big car, big 8-cylinder engine, whatever. It looked like a lawn mower battery. Little bitty thing sittin' there. I couldn't believe it. The owner of this hotel says to me, "Sometimes these cars are built in the south and they don't need a big battery to turn over when the oil's cold." Of course this is winter, I think this was January maybe. And so I ended up having to go buy a new battery. But my friend, the Counselor, she just chuckled. Of course there was no danger here or anything.

It was just embarrassment on my part. But she kept raising her voice and saying, “That little bitty thing? That little bitty thing?” (Laughter) Meaning that I had built up the fact that I had this lovely new car, and when it came time for it to perform, it didn’t even turn over and make a single sound. (Laughter)

Well, she and I had lots of adventures. Highway 18 runs east and west through Mason City and between Mason City and then the interstate and then Clear Lake, it is really flat and very open. Now they probably built it up since then, but this was thirty-some years ago. The only thing out there was the airport, the fair grounds and the county farm. Other than that, it was just desolate. Well, we had been out, she her way and me mine, all day long and the storm clouds were comin’ in and the wind was blowin’ from the north and you could just barely see the highway. The local radio stations were saying that this was a blizzard. Don’t go anywhere unless you absolutely have to and probably wouldn’t be any school the next day and all this kind of stuff. So, I’m coming in from the west and thinking, “We’re supposed to go to this NFB Christmas party, but it’s not until 7 o’clock and I think the roads will be closed by then; I bet we don’t go out to eat. So, I stopped at this place that was a locker plant; there weren’t Casey’s and Quick Trips on every corner in them days. I went to the locker plant and I got dried beef and I got Snickers candy bars, they had that. They had little bags of potato chips, little individual things and I got a couple cartons of milk. That was about all there was for edible food there. Then I hustled back to this little 14-unit motel which did not come with a restaurant and got checked into my room. She was already in hers. She came over and she’d been talking to people and stuff. Yes, our

evening plans had been canceled and it was gettin' too bad. We weren't going to go out on the road, so guess we just wouldn't get to eat, you know. We're talking about wouldn't get to eat supper, probably wouldn't get to eat breakfast until we got dug out. I said, "Well, I stopped and I got these things," and I showed her what was in there.

6:00

Duvall: Instead of saying, "That was a smart thing to do." Remember I'm the junior partner in these two...or "I'm glad you got enough for me too," or just any kind of positive statement. She says, "Milk? Who drinks milk?" I just wasn't confident enough in my relationship with her to say, "And what are you bringing to the table for dinner tonight?" (Laughter) Anyway, that was our experiences.

Years later when I had an office job, she was also a Supervisor. Over the two of us there was a man, Dave Quick, who was just a very, very dear man. Anyway, I had been sent off to a National meeting and I didn't know a soul. Everybody there was certainly above my pay grade. I had been instructed to go to all the sessions, gather the material, take notes if there was a voting incident, I had the power to vote on behalf of Iowa Blind and whatever. I was...I have a shy side and it had definitely come out. I was very shy at this meeting. There was a hospitality and we were supposed to be mixing and mingling. Everyone was getting a drink and stuff. I don't drink, so I was just having a Diet Coke or something like that. I'm sitting there and this man comes up to talk to me and the next thing I know he is soliciting sexual favors from me! And I'm thinkin', "What did I do to bring this on?" And so I rapidly...this is a State

Director, I mean this is somebody you wouldn't necessarily want to offend and so you should think twice about...did you really hear what you heard? And if you did, how do you handle this?

Ice: From another state?

Duvall: From another state, yes from another state. I'd never seen him before in my life. Anyway, I was mortified, so I just left. I went off to my room. The next day he kept trying to follow me around and apologize that he'd had too much to drink and he was so sorry. I thought, "I don't want anything to do with you." So I get back to the Department and I'm reporting in to the Director and Diane is there and Dave Quick, who's our immediate boss, was there. I'm telling this story and I am so indignant and Dave says to me, "Was he a blind guy?" I took that to mean that a sighted guy would not have solicited anything from me, you know, it would have to be somebody who couldn't see me that would be interested. And so then I get all offended, but before I have a chance to thoroughly wallow in being offended, Diane says, "Well, was he an old guy?" Now that makes it even worse, you know. (Laughter) They both just thought that was hilarious instead of being sympathetic with this sweet young thing that had been exposed to such an earthy experience.

Ice: Uh-huh.

Duvall: Uh-huh. Well, I used to always travel on my birthday. My birthday is the 3rd of June. So the first week of June is the time when the Feds have their regional and their

national meetings. I suppose they have to get the money spent before the end of the quarter or something like that. Anyway, there were always meetings. We would go to Kansas City or sometimes they would be bi-regional and maybe we'd go to Denver. So we'd be out traveling on my birthday. One time I was going to an Independent Living meeting and I had a chance to take my staff. Here they are, there's only four or five of them and me. We had spent all day at this meeting, and the next day it was my birthday. So, I announced to them that they had to go and they had to take good notes and pay attention, serve Iowa well, but I wasn't going, it was my birthday and I was going to sit by the pool and maybe even have a little drink; and of course I don't drink. But then anyway, that's what I was telling them. (Laughter) The next morning, they all went dutifully trooping off to the meetings and when I showed up I think they were almost disappointed. I had convinced them that it was my birthday and my birthday was in the middle of this trip and I was just going to take that day off. So then they decided they were going to take me out for dinner. That was going to be this big celebration and they would buy. I said, after we'd all eaten and it was time to pay the bill, I said, "You guys, you don't have to buy my dinner, and we're all on State travel allowance. We're all going to be reimbursed. I don't have to pay for my birthday dinner." They all developed a sense of humor working with me. I would try to...I would do those kinds of things where I would just convince them that something was going to happen. Then I'd come through. That's enough.

Ice: Okay. Thank you very much Louise and this again concludes our interview.

12:05
(End of Recording 2)

Deb Brix
3-18-2011